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Metro

Giving drivers a new way to feed the meter

By Eric Moskowitz | GLOBE STAFF NOVEMBER 22, 2011



BILL GREENE/GLOBE STAFF

The new Boston Meter Card will be inserted into the meter's unmarked diagonal slot.

The days of scrounging for quarters amid the coffee-stained recesses of your car or sheepishly asking for change in stores while keeping an eye out for the parking officer could be nearing an end.

Mayor Thomas M. Menino will introduce a parking debit card today to give drivers another option at 7,200 Boston meters that until now were coin-only.

The officially named Boston Meter Card is designed to be swiped at the time of parking and again when leaving, so drivers pay only for time used, down to the nickel. That means no more racing back to fill an expiring meter or driving off with time left on the clock.

“We want to make it as convenient as possible for Boston residents and visitors to patronize our neighborhood business districts,” Menino said in a statement.

The prepaid cards can be purchased at City Hall and the city’s tow lot or online in increments from \$5 to \$100. Unlike the MBTA’s CharlieCard, the Boston Meter Card will not be reloadable from home, though officials said they hope to add that feature. Menino’s administration is also in talks with a major retailer to make the cards available in stores.

In interviews at meters yesterday afternoon, parkers were enthusiastic.

Roman Kubyshkovskyy, 30, who asked a passerby for change after parking his Volkswagen on Kingston Street, said it would end a perpetual coin search.

“It’s a good idea, because I don’t always have change,” said Kubyshkovskyy, who works in financial reporting. As a North End resident, stopping by City Hall is no inconvenience; he also liked the idea of using a prepaid card for a small amount. “That’s much better than debit or credit,” he said.

Some who park infrequently in the city said they would stick to coins, rather than obtain a special card.

“I don’t come into Boston enough,” said Ken Littman, 60, a lawyer from Jamestown, R.I., who snagged a spot on Chinatown’s Tyler Street. “If I came in every day and had to find a place to park - although I probably would go crazy if I had to do that - I probably would get it.”

Amy Seto, 62, of Tewksbury said the ability to pay only for time used might make it worth it even though she visits Boston just twice a month. “That’s perfect,” said Seto, who works in the restaurant business. “Sometimes, I put \$2 in, and if I leave in half an hour, I lose all the quarters.”

Boston raised the parking rate from \$1 to \$1.25 an hour in January and collected \$14.2 million from meters in fiscal 2011, which ended in June.

No meters have been replaced to make way for the cards. Instead, the city is activating a technology unused since it acquired new meters in 2008.

Close observers may have noticed that the city's workhorse meter - the standard figure-8 shape found at nearly 90 percent of Boston's metered spaces - has an unmarked diagonal slot near the coin chute. That is where the Boston Meter Cards will go, and city workers have checked to make sure they work. They do.

When it bought those meters, the Menino administration's primary goal was to thwart scofflaws who had known for years that they could render Boston's meters out of order by sticking foreign objects into the coin slot. That caused one in four meters to malfunction, costing the city revenue.

Manufacturers typically intend for meters to last a decade or less. But Boston clung to its last batch for nearly 13 years while watching the market for a more tamper-resistant meter. Ultimately, convinced by a product from Florida- and Canada-based MacKay Meters, the city purchased 9,500 for \$1.3 million, roughly \$130 a meter. It installed most and saved the rest for replacements.

The new meters reduced malfunctioning to about 2 percent, according to the Boston Transportation Department. After becoming comfortable with the meters, the city began developing and testing the parking card, which boasts a swan-boat photo, the city seal, and Menino's name.

The prepaid cards cannot be used at the 107 multispace meters that serve 1,000 spots on Newbury Street and elsewhere in the Back Bay. Those meters, which cost about \$10,000 each, allow parkers to pay with credit cards and receive proof-of-payment receipts to be displayed inside the car. About half of parkers on those streets now pay by credit card. The multispace meters were not considered for wider use because they cost 10 times as much to install as standard meters, and because they are not appropriate for short or winding blocks.

The Boston Meter Card also cannot be used at the 144 meters the city installed

downtown in March as part of a free pilot program to test single-space meters that could read credit and debit cards. Those meters are more convenient for cash-less parkers - no City Hall trip is required - but the technology was considered less proven when the city was seeking a workhorse meter more than three years ago, according to the transportation department.

To promote the cards, drivers who buy them by Dec. 31 will receive a 20 percent discount. In addition to City Hall and the 200 Frontage Road tow lot, the cards can be purchased at cityofboston.gov/parking. The transportation department will also sell them from its mobile command center at select locations during the holiday season, promoting them as stocking stuffers.

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